

AT HOME YET AT LARGE: MARTHA STEWART AND THE AESTHETICS OF DOMESTIC FANTASY

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ABSTRACT

Martha Stewart is perhaps one of the most polarizing public figures of our time. In August of 2022, Stewart turned eighty years old and can claim that she's modeled, been employed as a stockbroker, flipped a farmhouse, built a billion dollar corporation, and served hard time in federal prison. Despite her relative prominence in American culture, Martha's effect on her predominantly female audiences remains rather elusive. We are invited to be "at home" with Martha as voyeurs privy to a fantastical world that we might attain through our own diligent efforts. The pages of Martha Stewart Living, cookbooks, blogs, and television demonstrations offer endless possibilities for escape into an idyllic world where the audience is invited to take control of their domestic space and enjoy dwelling there. Martha's position both at the head of the table and behind the infinitesimal details of the party provides her unique rhetorical possibilities.

KEYWORDS

Martha Stewart, Domesticity, Rhetoric, Feminism

1. INTRODUCTION

Martha Stewart is perhaps one of the most polarizing public figures of our time. In August of 2022, Stewart turned eighty years old and can claim that she's modeled, been employed as a stock broker, flipped a farmhouse, built a billion dollar corporation, and served hard time in federal prison. And yet, despite her relative prominence in American culture, Martha's effect on her predominantly female audiences remains rather elusive. In a 1996 article published in the New York Times, journalist Patricia McLaughlin remarked that "Stewart is both 'Fairy GodMartha' who can 'teach us to spin the straw of housework into gold' and also 'Wicked StepMartha' who 'appears as a reproach'" [1]. While some view Martha as an inspiration to get their act together, others find her invitation to "share the good feeling of looking at the world through sparkling windows" irksome and impossible to attain. Regardless of an individual's personal opinions of Martha and her demeanor, there is no denying that her arrival as a self made self made millionaire was the result of a long climb from her humble beginnings in Nutley, New Jersey. In the 1980s, powerful women like Martha Stewart and Oprah Winfrey filled majorly visible executive roles paving the way for more women to enter into a male dominated business sphere.

However, despite her success as a major business mogul, the majority of Stewart's carefully crafted communication speaks to the timbre of "feeling good about everyday living" as opposed to "the messy business of investment finance, of maintaining an edge in corporate America, or expanding a media empire" [2, pp. 7]. We are invited to be "at home" with Martha,

while we are actually voyeurs privy to a fantastical world that we might attain through our own diligent efforts. The pages of *Martha Stewart Living*, various cookbooks, blogs, and television demonstrations offer endless possibilities for escape into an idyllic world where the audience is invited to take control of their domestic space and enjoy their time spent dwelling there. Martha's position both at the head of the table and behind the infinitesimal details of the party provides her unique rhetorical possibilities.

2. METHODOLOGY

The experiences that audiences have of Martha Stewart are primarily visual; by harnessing beauty and acquiring "Good Things," Martha consistently delivers the message that anyone can live "the good life." As a basis for analyzing Stewart's visual rhetorics, I will be employing a hybrid of Catherine Belsey's model for textual analysis and Laura Mulvey's visual pleasure theory. According to Belsey, "textual analysis as a research method involves a close encounter with the work itself, an examination of the details without bringing to them more presuppositions than we can help" [3, pp.162]. I will examine how various multimodal visual rhetorics such as table scapes, DIY decor, and food arrangements serve as entry points into domestic fantasy texts. In order to deconstruct the semiotics of these visuals, I will utilize elements of Laura Mulvey's visual pleasure framework. Although originally conceived as a tool for deconstructing portrayals of women in film, Laura Mulvey's text entitled *Visual and Other Pleasures* presents a number of helpful tools for conceptualizing how Martha's representations of domestic activity contain both fantasy and reality. Mulvey contends that multimodal representations of women inherently embody "emotion and reverie...but also are the essential means of understanding and deciphering them" [4, pp.133]. Mulvey argues that "the image of woman as spectacle and fetish sets in motion another chain of metonymies" across platforms such as the melodrama. However, in the context of Martha's work, the feminine image, under the guise of homemaker, functions differently for a majority feminine audience seeking to take control of their own domestic sphere. In this sense, Martha Stewart, as a woman, functions within "an advanced capitalist society" where she as a woman is "consumed" by her audiences and represents women at large "as consumer[s] of commodities" [4, pp. xxxii]. In turn, her audience is representative of a body of "women exchanged in image [who] transform themselves into image through commodity consumption" [4, pp. xxxii]. Whether in the pages of *Martha Stewart Living* (MSL) or on the televised screen, "the direction of the gaze shifted, satisfyingly, from woman as spectacle to the psyche" [4, pp. xxxiv]. In this context, woman is not necessarily an object of male fetish, but has morphed into a semiotic representation and embodiment of what the woman can "do" and "make" in her own sphere. This newly unearthed psyche allows for a homemaker to transform her own experience in her home for the sake of creating beautiful and pleasurable experiences for herself and her family. Within Belsey's textual framework, the woman is the constructor of her own narratives through the scenes that she sets. Elaborate tablescapes, decor, and crafts become the potential sights and sounds of interaction in which she wields control. A hostess sets the path and the table, quite literally, for gatherings and rituals.

Lastly, Mulvey's framework acknowledges that there is pleasure in looking and that by "taking other people as objects" we "subject them to a controlling and curious gaze" [4, pp. 17]. Freud referred to this phenomenon as scopophilia and discussed how it allows the audience as an external observer to view "this body outside of itself as an alter ego [which] prepares the way for identification with others" [4, pp. 18]. In the context of Martha's demonstrations, the audience interacts with decor, recipe preparation, and homescapes through "screens" and "mirrors." The screen allows "for temporary loss of ego while simultaneously reinforcing

it...the glamorous impersonates the ordinary” [4, pp. 18]. Through Martha’s gentle coaching, audiences mirror her actions and gain the skills and confidence to recreate these experiences in their own domestic sphere. The complex interaction that occurs between Stewart as a model of perfection and the homemaker as a receptacle for this knowledge is deeply rooted in many cultural practices dating back to the early publication of etiquette manuals.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

The relatively new field of cultural rhetorics posits that all culture is rhetorical and all rhetoric is cultural; from this perspective, we can view women’s dedication to the domestic environment as simultaneously prescribed by societal norms and capable of shaping them. In an attempt to define the term “culture” more broadly for transdisciplinary academic use, Baldwin et al established seven different themes of existing definitions: structure/patterns, functions, process, product, refinement, group membership, and power/ideology [5, pp. 29]. The most useful for this discussion are those encompassing structure/patterns, product, and refinement. Existing definitions dealing with culture as a structure or patterns acknowledge that culture is a “total accumulation...more than the sum of the traits” which is pervasive in all elements of a group. Inherent in this structure are “thoughts, beliefs, assumptions, meanings, attitudes, preferences, values, standards” which define a group’s behavior [5, pp. 30].

3.1. Defining Domestic Culture

The publication of domestic literature as early as 1850 highlights the historic need for Americans to decipher the home’s role in parsing “the themes of morality, science, Americanization, and modernism” [6, pp. 4). While “furniture, curtains, and bathroom fixtures do not have inherent qualities of morality or character...domestic-advice manuals give these items cultural significance and characteristics” [6, pp. 5). This turn towards “the product” as defined by Baldwin et al, allows for something broader than representation and lends itself to the creation of “artifacts” and “cultural texts” [6, pp. 30]. For example, this allows a balsam fir to be more than just a species of tree but rather a symbol of Christmas and text telling a story of togetherness. The ornaments that adorn it are no longer seen merely as factory blown glass but grandma’s favorite bulbs. The acceptance of these deeper meanings have the potential to open the audience up as a potential target group for refinement or cultivation. Baldwin et al point out that this occurs through “instruction” and “uniquely human efforts” which are tied to moral progress or the “stage of development that divides civilized from savage,” and/or the “study of perfection” [6, pp. 30]. Cultural definitions associated with refinement also “frame culture as a sense of individual or group cultivation to higher intellect or morality” which play into attaining power on both the solo and collective levels [6, pp. 31]. Although the landscape for women’s participation outside of the home has shifted to be more inclusive, the continued demand for lifestyle advice suggests that American culture is still very interested in a curated home.

Martha’s general affect and publications enter into a long standing tradition of domestic literature and etiquette guides dating back to the nineteenth century. With women confined snugly in the home, postbellum publishers found an audience eager to channel feminine responsibility and productivity. Conduct texts such as *The Ladies’ Repository* portrayed “the icon of the American woman as angel of the hearth” which conveniently silenced other possibilities of activism modeled by heavy hitters such as “Lucretia Mott, Sojourner Truth, Frances Willard, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who had assumed powerful reformist voices”

[7, pp. 274-275]. While these women were highly influential, their style of public rhetorical activity was far from the norm for the average American woman who was encouraged to be “the wine of life” which provided “a sense of security and repose” [7, pp. 274]. Rather than undermining women’s importance completely, authors such as Jerome Paine Bates articulated an alternate sphere of influence for women and favored “the ‘queen and her kingdom’ trope, [where he] defines woman’s rhetorical role in the home as indispensable” [7, pp. 278]. See [8, Fig. 1]“Earth’s Noblest Thing, a Woman Perfected.”



Figure 1: Cowen, B.R. “Earth's Noblest Thing, A Woman Perfected.” *Our Beacon Light: Devoted to Employment, Education, and Society* [Columbus, OH], Patrick Gordon, 1889.

Although this framework does afford women some form of influence, it denies individual agency and confines her to a singular space in which “she practically rules or ruins her kingdom and its subjects” [7, pp. 278]. Volumes such as Bates’ *The Imperial Highway: Essays on Business and Home Life* (1888), “participated in a widespread cultural project to police borders between domestic and public space and to keep the average woman in her home and off the podium” [7, pp. 277]. This post of both honor and duty came with high expectations from outside male figures; while they were occupied with shaping the country’s future through official channels, women worked tirelessly to raise children, keep house, and provide respite from an external rising industrialized state. With literacy for women on the rise, a domestic movement composed of publications took shape in an effort to guide women towards successful management of the family and home environment.

Initially, female domestic advisors couched advice for their female consumers in more familiar textual modalities such as popular fiction and cookbooks. Inexpensive “sentimental novels served as symbols for religious teachings” and “domestic-advice manuals would pick up on this convention, but use furniture and carpets in place of characters of symbolic teachers” [6, pp. 12]. An eager audience emerged for texts such as Julia McNair Wright’s *The Complete Home* (1879) in which McNair Wright assumes the fictional role of all knowing auntie advising three nieces who “represented a certain subset of American women. Miriam...who wanted a comfortable, simple home where everyone would feel welcome...Hester who is too concerned with her career and intellect...[and] Helen is obsessed with the frills and fanciness she imagines will accompany romance and the conquest of a husband” [6, pp. 9]. The inclusion of these tropes serves as a powerful statement about the heterogeneous character of the American women in the late nineteenth century and also as a reminder of societal pressures and preferences of the era.

Catherine Beecher, sister of the best selling author Harriet Beecher-Stowe, was instrumental in domestic literature’s transformation and “poured her intellectual soul into domestic writing” [6, pp.15]. Beecher’s family was very socially active across religious communities and advocated for educational rights for women. In opening her Female Seminary in Hartford Connecticut, she hoped to prepare young women for “their presumed profession as housewives and family caretakers” [6, pp. 16]. While this feels bleak for the modern feminist, it was a step in the correct direction; in the introduction to their *American Women’s Home* (1879), Catherine and Harriet addresses their audience as victims of both “disabilities” and “sufferings” because the “honors and duties of the family state are not appreciated...family labor is regarded as menial and disgraceful” [6, pp.1]). As health and sanitation became greater concerns, women were also challenged to become domiologists who made more concrete connections between furnishings, décor and their family’s livelihood. The turn of the century marked a renewed focus on the efficient housewife, but added a dimension of rationality to the discourse. It was not simply motivation enough to tend house well because it was the moral thing to do; rather “science influenced domestic fantasy” [6, pp. 42]. This type of thinking set the stage for American culture to embrace unparalleled levels of consumerism which was aided by mass production.

3.2. Domestic Advice in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries

Whether through willing embrace or begrudging necessity, there is still a tremendous demand for guidance on how to tackle domestic responsibilities; however, it is often couched within a conversation about how to “do it all.” Etiquette manuals might be a thing of yesteryear but they still remain in an altered form which has taken on the more fashionable category title of “lifestyle advice.”

In 2007, Workman Publishing Company Inc. introduced *What’s a Cook to Do?* which was the first in a series of five popular advice books targeted toward eager individuals looking to improve their domestic skills and enhance their leisure time. The last volume in the series, written by Susan Spungen and illustrated by Sun Young Park, outlines how to “find your inner clipboard-wielding party planner” [9, pp. 1). The first chapter entitled “The Gifted Hostess” frames the remaining seven chapters and contends that “a gifted hostess makes it look easy” [9, pp. 2]. See [10, Figure 2] “Chapter 1 Cover Page: The Gifted Hostess.”



Figure 2: Park, Sun Young. “Chapter 1 Cover Page: The Gifted Hostess.” *What’s a Hostess to Do? 313 Ideas and Inspirations for Effortless Entertaining*. Artisan, New York, 2013.

The text accompanying an illustration of a thin, youthful woman reinforces the idea that “she knows the shortcuts that make entertaining less laborious and more enjoyable for everyone” [9, pp.2 2]. The artfully arranged flowers in the foreground give way to an aloof looking man in the background of the drawing eating what appear to be tomatoes. The serene look on the hostess’ face as well as her open body language give the illusion of calmness despite the mounting stress that she feels given the myriad daunting tasks that come with hosting an event. The real skills to be learned in this “how to” guide are not just the practical ones such as seating arrangements and cheese selection, but also how to appear collected and at ease with oneself amidst the chaos. Within the very first few pages, we are assured that “if these skills skipped a generation, this book will help you look as though you learned it all at your mother’s knee” which implies that the maternal figure is a better source of domestic knowledge than the manual itself. This ironic statement draws attention to a deeper cultural fascination with the concept of learning the science of the home *within the home* rather than at large. However, the most successful home moguls operate *solely* at large across multimedia platforms. The clever use of phrases such as “From My Home to Yours” (Martha Stewart) and “We Believe in Home” (Magnolia Home) in promotional materials provide the illusion of intimacy while driving consumer investment in products. Through these linguistic and visual cues, “lifestyle advisors” are able to bring audiences into their own domestic spaces where they attentively await further instruction.

4. MEDIA SATURATION AND CULTURAL IMPLICATIONS

The advent of increased visual media across multiple platforms has allowed for moguls like Martha Stewart to “achieve almost complete media saturation” and this had led to it being “almost impossible to claim that she has not addressed a need in American culture for domestic advice” [6, pp. 4].

4.1. The Making of Martha Stewart

In the early 1980s, Martha leveraged her husband Andy Stewart’s prominent position at a publishing house to launch a series of books that extended her local Westport catering business

into a full fledged mystical experience for fans wanting to learn to host exquisite parties of their own. The 2003 television movie, *Martha, Inc*, portrays Martha's subsequent success in publishing as the start of a vicious cycle leading to the demise of her familial life. The publication of her books and subsequent magazine *Martha Stewart Living* piqued the interest of PBS who began featuring Martha on a weekly thirty minute show in 1992. Martha's public talks highlighted her down to earth approach: "I remember family Christmases where we'd all run to the backyard to gather acorns to make our ornaments because we didn't have any money, but we had a house full of love and that's what really matters" [11, 55:20-55:29]. Byron writes that "her magazine wasn't just about warmth, or fantasies...[it] was about 'demystification...' which meant 'understanding,' 'knowledge,' 'power,' and 'control.' These had been the words and the promise of the entire women's movement for the previous thirty years" [12, pp. 199-200]. Reaching more women necessitated an expansion beyond high end print books to something that could be viewed at no cost or purchased cheaply on a monthly basis, like a magazine at a grocery store check out stand.

In 2021, Stewart published a guide entitled *Martha Stewart's Very Good Things: Clever Tips & Genius Ideas for an Easier, More Enjoyable Life*. Often, her pointers are couched within the context of virtuosity and how a practice or object can be seen as "a good thing" [13, pp. 7]. In the introduction, Martha recounts the history of her landmark catchphrase "it's a good thing" to frame her collection of recipes, DIY projects, and life hacks. She recalls that she "had just painted the handles of [her] gardening hand tools a bright orange, so they could not possibly be lost in the chaos of the garden" [13, pp. 7]. For Martha and her readers, a "good thing" is not something that is necessarily glamorous or for sale, but rather something that simplifies your everyday life. It has the potential to relieve stress, allow you to accomplish your goals faster, and infuse your life with beauty. Simply put: "The idea must be straightforward but yield a surprising result...or conversely, it could be an unexpected means to achieve a desired end" [13, pp. 7]. For the modern woman, having solutions at her fingertips might feel empowering whilst bombarded with a slew of responsibilities inside and outside of the home. Martha's assurances that "old or new, the clever ideas here are all designed to make your life easier and more enjoyable" joins a historic conversation about what it means to take control of tasks that might otherwise take control of us. By dividing this volume into six neat and tidy categories, the reader is introduced to curated domains that are fit for mastering. Decorating, Homekeeping, Organizing, Cooking, Entertaining, and Celebrating are landmark categories that serve as cultural touch points.

4.2. It's a "Good Thing;" The Role of Virtue and Perfectionism in Domestic Performance

Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia's (MSLO) philosophy prides itself on "feeling good about everyday living" and "instilling [audiences] with the pleasure and confidence that come from the growing sense of mastery and discovery we foster in our customers and ourselves" [2, pp. 11, 6]. MSLO advocates that the private cultivation of domestic skills and talents is a "good thing" because it promotes the comfort of others and self actualization. This deeply rooted philosophy demands a "good host [who] opens her home as her own but does so in consciousness of others' needs..." and "...domestic aesthetic activities acquire ethical aspects, with efforts to arrange an environment..." [14, pp. 257]. The careful curation of menus, decorations, and other elements of ambiance are reflective of intentional labor usually performed by women.

Feminist scholars have pointed out the dangers associated with being forced into the role of wife and mother who is responsible for making “practical judgements that imaginatively identify what will please others” [14, pp. 258]. In her article entitled “Martha and the Masters: Virtuous Domestic Aesthetic Activity,” Olberding asserts that these practices are especially harmful for individuals who are “inclined to think the practices of hospitality are indeed morally valuable” [14, pp. 258]. In turn, women who cannot meet the demands as laid forth in publications such as *Martha Stewart Living* feel as though they have failed and might fall into patterns of “self loathing that accompany the reader’s acknowledgment that they cannot attain the image of perfection pictured in *MSL*” [2, pp. 12].

Others, such as author Jennifer Lancaster, adopt a healthy balance and take Martha’s tips in stride while looking at “what Martha does from a macro point of view” [15, pp. 59]. In her humorous account of adopting *The Tao of Martha*, Lancaster realizes over the course of a year that she was better off having “dipped [her] toe into Martha’s world” and writes that the organizational strategies that she gleaned are “going to lower my own stress level, which will impact all of all—me, the pets, Fletch...and the beard. It’s a good thing” [15, pp. 41]. Lancaster’s comical embrace of practical techniques and failures such as the lopsided cake pictured on the cover of the book [16, Figure 3] serve as a reminder that not all women are domestic mavens and that we should take what we find useful from Martha and other lifestyle experts and toss out the rest.

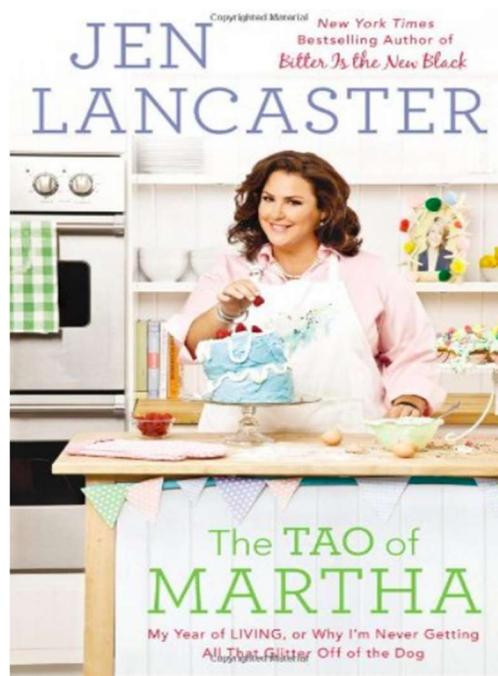


Figure 3: Feingold, Deborah. “Cover Photograph of Jen Lancaster.” *The Tao of Martha: My Year of LIVING, or Why I’m Never Getting All That Glitter Off of the Dog*. New American Library, New York, 2013.

By detaching oneself from the firm judgment of others, contemporary domestic advice and instructors have the potential to be both empowering and pleasurable. Attaching one's labor to domestic activity such as cooking, decorating, and crafting guards against “problematic forms of self sacrifice and alienated labor that color gendered representations of the home and its activity [14, pp. 258). Stewart encourages this mindset by emphasizing that “being-at-home in the world is a mode of inhabiting a space of potentiality” (2, pp.7). This framework allows women to go beyond the limiting forces of prescribed domestic literature which confined women to set tasks. In contemporary America, many women have the choice to traverse the boundaries of this domestic sphere and might choose to embrace some elements of domestic activity while outsourcing others.

For individuals like Ralph Waldo Emerson, reliance on the self within the domestic environment provided protection from the corruptions of the public discourse and ill will. He viewed this space as “a place of private contemplation and self-criticism” which “constitute the work that must be done as a matter of cultivating character, of ‘upbuilding’” [2, pp. 10]. Certainly Emerson was not accessing highest self by making snow bundt sculptures, but it does stand to reason that there are some benefits to be garnered from engaging creativity. Some of Martha’s critics contend that she sets the bar all too high. However, this unattainable yearning is precisely the reason that it works. The glittery images, the glossy pages, and the well lit stills allow for the audience to imagine the goodness and the beauty that they might have a chance at attaining if they can assert themselves. Martha’s gentle coaching and assurances that anyone can do it is further enhanced “by the example set by Stewart across a wide range of media outlets” allowing “readers [to] literally see Martha Stewart living her life” [2, pp. 14]. This aesthetic power is transformative and transportable.

4.3. Take Us Away: Farm Fresh Eggs, The Grand Party, and Mystical Snow Bundts

In 1982, Clarkson N. Potter Inc. published Martha’s first book entitled *Entertaining* which is described on the inner flap as “a totally new style of entertaining that is personal, relaxed, and expressive” [17]. The book is organized into ten chapters which provide recipes, vivid photographs, and practical advice to organize different types of culinary experiences. Furthermore, it is marketed on the back flap as a guide that is “especially reassuring for those for whom entertaining has always been intimidating—she shows how with a little thought and effort any party can come off with grace and ease.” Thirty-five dollars in 1982 (or a whopping \$109.98 in 2022 currency according to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics) provides the audience with a first class ticket into the land of fantastical flower arrangements, intricate plating, and exquisite ingredients.

To bolster her ethos, Martha’s bio on the back cover reassures the audience that “she lives and works in a renovated nineteenth-century farmhouse” and “in addition to writing, catering and food consulting, she tends a large vegetable and herb garden, raises chickens and geese” (See Figure 4). In a sense, Martha both “walks the walk” and “talks the talk” by framing her recipes and advice within the context of her own lived experiences.

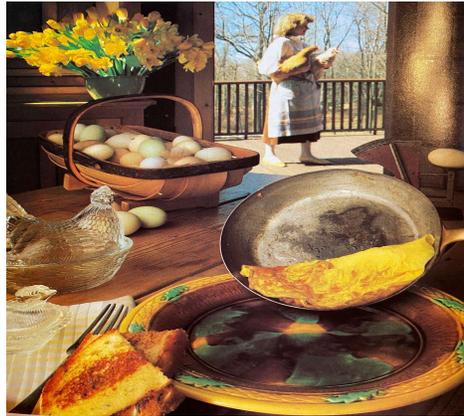


Figure 4: Geiger, Michael. “Photograph accompanying recipe for Omelette with Wild Mushrooms.” *Martha Stewart’s Quick Cook*. Clarkson N. Potter, Inc, New York, 1983.

At first glance, it might appear that readers might “want what they cannot have, striving for transcendent splendor of the richly appointed homes and gardens of Stewart and her friends” [2, pp. 12]. However, for the self aware voyeur, decadent cocktails [20, Figure 5] and artfully executed hors d’oeuvres [21, Figure 6] “provide an opportunity to be wonderfully creative in the kitchen” and to treat oneself [22, pp. 6].



Figure 5: Bosch, Peter. “Photograph of chocolate cocktails.” *Martha Stewart’s Hors d’Oeuvres: The Creation and Presentation of Fabulous Finger Foods*. Clarkson N. Potter, Inc. New York, 1984.



Figure 6: Bosch, Peter. “Photograph of Endive with Beets and Mustard Sprouts opposite recipe.” *Martha Stewart’s Hors d’Oeuvres: The Creation and Presentation of Fabulous Finger Foods*. Clarkson N. Potter, Inc. New York, 1984.

An adoption of a relaxed attitude that embraces the notion that things do not need to come out perfectly and that these recipes can be prepared for solo enjoyment transforms the idea of pleasure into one that is self gratifying. Furthermore, living vicariously through the process of seeing others create beautiful things, such as snow bundt sculptures (23, Figure 7) is a low stakes venture not unlike visiting the Metropolitan Museum of Art or watching a film. The process becomes problematic when we, as audience members, idealize and co-opt these standards of decadent living as be all-end all measures of our own success.



Figure 7: “Photograph of Snow Bundt Sculptures.” *DIY Crafts and Decorations*, Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia, 2014, <https://www.marthastewart.com/267101/snow-lanterns>.

This behavior can be best understood as a set of practices that lead to the polarizing Martha phenomenon. Christopher Byron, a journalist and neighbor of Martha in Westport, Connecticut writes that “Many said they adored her for her example in their lives; many others said they despised her because she made them feel guilty for what they could not accomplish for themselves” [12, pp. 8. Ultimately, cultivating a healthy balance between escapism and agency allows for the practitioner of domestic activity to remain attached to his/her labor and while deriving amusement and pleasure.

5. CONCLUSION

In a reply written to a fictitious female named Sor Filotea, the “Respuesta,” Mexican nun Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz wrote: “And what shall I tell you, lady, of the natural secrets I have discovered while cooking?” [24, pp. 76]. This cheeky question, posed in 1691, suggests that domesticity, as a complex domain ripe for mastery, holds more opportunities for intellectual and creative activity than traditionally perceived. If we, as a culture, can move beyond the rigid framework that pits the feminine against an impossibly high bar for perfection in housekeeping, we open up new possibilities for homemakers to disengage from self critique. In turn, audiences establish virtuous homemaking in terms of their own enjoyment, fantasies, and realities. By dismissing the age-old common assumption that a woman toiling in the kitchen is fraught with burden, we might be moving closer to accepting Sor Juana’s assertion “that had Aristotle prepared victuals, he would have written more” [24, pp. 77).

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